

Beyond
YOUTH CUSTODY

**RESETTLEMENT
OF GIRLS AND
YOUNG WOMEN
RESEARCH SUMMARY**



LOTTERY FUNDED

This report addresses a worrying gap in the knowledge about the effective resettlement of girls and young women. Reviewing research literature in a number of relevant areas, it cross-references evidence of what works in the resettlement of young people with what we know about the wider need of girls and young women. This *iterative synthesis* approach thus provides a gender-sensitive approach to inform policy and practice development in resettlement for this specific group.

Introduction: addressing the resettlement needs of an ignored constituency

- Recent years has seen an increasing focus on the resettlement of young people after custody, with a number of initiatives designed to address stubbornly high reoffending rates. However, the specific needs of girls and young women have received little attention in policy and practice. This is a worrying gap because research with adult female offenders consistently warns that what works with male offenders is unlikely to work with females.
- The resettlement needs of girls and young women have been ignored partly because they make up a small proportion of the custodial population, and partly because they usually offend less frequently and seriously than young males.
- Academics have also largely ignored the needs of this group in resettlement. This is reflective of relatively limited numbers of studies on women in the criminal justice system more generally, but with even less known about younger females, and less still around custody.
- This report provides gender-sensitive perspective of the established gender-neutral principles of what works in resettlement with young people. The report first considers the contemporary policy context for the resettlement of girls and young women, specifically in relation to *Transforming Youth Custody*. Literature searches then focused on reasons behind female youth offending, reviews judicial responses to this group, details the characteristics of young females in custody, and reflects on lessons from interventions with older females. Finally, the report draws on any resettlement studies or interventions that have previously included some focus on girls or young women's specific needs.

Implications of the emerging policy landscape

- It appears that the government's proposed secure colleges would accommodate girls and young women, including most of those currently considered too vulnerable for YOIs. These large institutions may be less conducive to resettlement than the current small units in which girls are held, exacerbated by likely greater distances from home which strain supportive family relationships.
- Interim policy measures outlined in *Transforming Youth Custody* look more helpful, including an emphasis on the need to plan resettlement from the beginning of a sentence and more effective use of release on temporary licence. Funds have been provide for additional resettlement consortia to support these changes. However, there is again a lack of attention to the specific resettlement of girls.
- All adults leaving custody now receive a minimum of one year statutory supervision in the community, increasing both resettlement support and risk of recall for young women. It is intended new 'resettlement prisons' for adults will see better consistency of resettlement support by commissioning the same provider for custody and community services, and the government will also pilot an open unit for women due to be released in order to aid the transition to the community further.
- Some previous policy concern for gender-specific criminal justice support, through for instance the *Together Women* programme, has been underlined by new legal duties on the Minister of Justice to ensure that rehabilitation services meet the needs of females who offend.
- The *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda may hold particular risks for women as there is limited evidence of 'what works' in order to set early outcome targets, numbers of women will be very small to show a significant improvement so gender-specific services become less attractive, and they may be disproportionately supervised by contract services.

Existing lessons of effective resettlement of young people

- Gender-neutral principles for the effective resettlement of young people cannot be assumed to apply uncritically to females specifically, but provide a useful starting point for analysis.
- The first principle is to ensure a smooth transition of support custody to community. This means commencing the resettlement process from the point of sentencing – the custodial intervention should be about preparing for release. Planning should be individualised and forward-looking, while community support should build on process made in custody. All agencies need to be responsible for resettlement at all stages.
- The period immediately following release is critical for young people. An often increased determination to make changes presents engagement opportunities, but there are also enhanced risks of non-compliance if hopes are not met. The transition may also be traumatic.
- The second principle is the coordination of partnership agencies to deliver the wide range of services required to meet the complex needs of young people leaving custody. A resettlement intervention would focus on brokering such ‘wraparound’ support.
- The third principle is the early engagement of the young person in order to help them shift their personal identity to a more proactive member of society. Positive relationships between practitioners and young person is crucial to developing the self-image to promote desistance from crime.

Explaining offending in girls and young women

- Although factors predicting delinquency for boys and young men tend to hold true for girls and young women, certain factors have a stronger association for females, such as problems of abuse, victimisation and health.
- Home relationships difficulties are frequent precursors of offending in girls and young women, including abusive relationships with parents or step-parents. Indeed, these are part of a wider pattern of past victimisation and trauma which might include abuse, perhaps in childhood or at the hands of partners.
- Unlike males, partner relationships and parenthood may trigger offending rather than desistance, perhaps because of the increased risk of coercion by male partners. Peer relationships are also an area of increased risk, both in the violent breakdown of friendships, but also forms of abuse and sexual exploitation in peer groups. Female violent behaviour is frequently a response to perceived victimisation in the family, partner or peer relationships.
- Female offending is also more likely to be associated with various mental health issues, including self-harm, depression, substance misuse and attempted suicide.
- Finally, it has been argued that expectations of femininity make girls and young women particularly susceptible to the relative deprivation, with more pressure to find legal or illegal means to live up to those expectations for sexual attractiveness.

Judicial responses to offending in girls and young women

- Established research has suggested that females who offend are less likely to find their way into the criminal justice system, but that when they do, they are treated more harshly than males because they transgress gender expectations.
- Tools assessing risk factors for offending calibrated around the evidence for male criminality tend to inflate the risk of females who are much more likely to be victims of abuse. With a ‘scaled approach’ of responding risk, this can mean that females are more likely to receive stronger criminal justice interventions, with associated increased risks of breach and so further punishments.

The use of custody for girls and young women

- Although the increase in the use of custody for girls and young women was greater than for equivalent males during the decade from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, they have since seen a larger proportionate fall.
- Girls in custody are considered vulnerable enough to be held in Secure Training Centres or Secure Children's Homes. However, while boys turning 18 continue in Young Offender Institutions, female young adults are sent to adult prisons, with a corresponding lack of age-appropriate provision. If they turn 18 while serving the sentence, they can be transferred (along with a transfer to adult probation services), causing trauma and breaking trusting relationships with professionals that are an important to resettlement.
- Girls and young women in custody have higher levels of needs and vulnerabilities than males, including higher levels of home violence, sex abuse, care history, education deficit, mental health problems, poor self-image and self-harm. Smaller numbers in custody may see an even higher concentration of these complex needs, increasing the resettlement challenge.
- More girls and young women are being held further from home, making resettlement arrangements and maintaining supportive relationships more difficult.

Evidence of effective justice work with girls and young women

- Given patterns of past victimisation, approaches relying on coercion, confrontation or overt challenges to anti-social behaviour tend not to work.
- Professionals' ability to engage is particularly important to effective delivery with this group, including understanding the woman's perspective, being optimistic that she can change and valuing the woman's own concerns.
- Given the importance of negative relationships to their aetiology, it is important to build girls' and young women's understanding of and capability to form positive relationships. Staff-young person relationships should be considered a model for this. Where appropriate, family relationships are also a key focus for effective support.
- Interventions should acknowledge and aim to mitigate the extensive levels of victimisation, violence and abuse. Staff recognition of this trauma (possibly aggravated transitions into and out of custody) is a prerequisite to helping girls and young women who offend take control of their lives and change their behaviour.
- Interventions should be anchored in the desistance paradigm, focusing on users' strengths and enhancing self-worth, resilience, agency, and maturation away from offending.
- Interventions for girls and young women should aim to provide a comprehensive and holistic service, and needs to be gender responsive. It is also important for interventions to take place in an environment that makes them feel at ease and safe, which may be helped by single sex provision.

Evidence of effective resettlement with adult females

- Few interventions with adult women can demonstrate statistically significant impact on offending (partly for methodological reasons), but can show improvement in 'softer outcomes' that may eventually impact on recidivism. As in the Together Women programme, this may include being more confident in their ability to change their lives.
- Research with adult women supports lessons from gender-neutral research with young people, including the need for wraparound support to address multiple needs and a smooth transition to the community with planning from the start of a sentence.
- However, the particular vulnerabilities and pathways into offending for females who offend means an emphasis on certain aspects of resettlement support. A note of caution is that wider support for a complex range of needs should not mean setting women up to fail orders by increasing licence requirements.
- Women are less likely to live with their family on release, so face a heightened need for accommodation after release. Given the importance of relationships, rehousing women close to existing support networks can be useful. However, this may need to be balanced against feeling the need for a fresh start or finding safety away from an abusive relationships.
- Relationships are key to stability and desistance after release for women, and are central to any shift in identity towards desistance. The quality of relationships with partners and parents, and how they see their role as mothers, are all important to recidivism. These can be helped through more flexible use of release on temporary licence, not restricting family visits, and engaging families in reintegration.
- Gender-neutral disciplinary systems (in custody or community) that fail to take into account women's increased likelihood of expressive displays of verbal or physical violence risk restricting early or temporary release and increasing breach of licence.
- The need for programmes inside or after custody that focus on helping women to forge positive relationships has been a consistent call in research literature. Mentors may be helpful in offering relational support.
- Considering the way that trauma and violence affects each experience in resettlement is important to desistance, as is the need to address such issues through interventions.
- Valuing women's own assessments of the services they need to reduce offending helps reduce recidivism.
- There is debate over whether programmes in resettlement should be single-sex. Mixed initiatives may help develop healthy relationships with men, but reduce the chances to address past trauma and male dominance.
- Women benefit from less confrontational interventions that instead develop nurturing trust with staff and supporters.
- The skill and style of workers is a primary factor in women's engagement. Central is their understanding and sensitivity about women's abusive backgrounds and health needs. Specialism in female caseloads and training in gender-responsive strategies may improve licence completion rates.
- Women are particularly sensitive to the risks of support withdrawal at the end of licence, so exit strategies are important, including the need to identify networks of continued support through community partners.

Indicative research on the resettlement of girls and young women

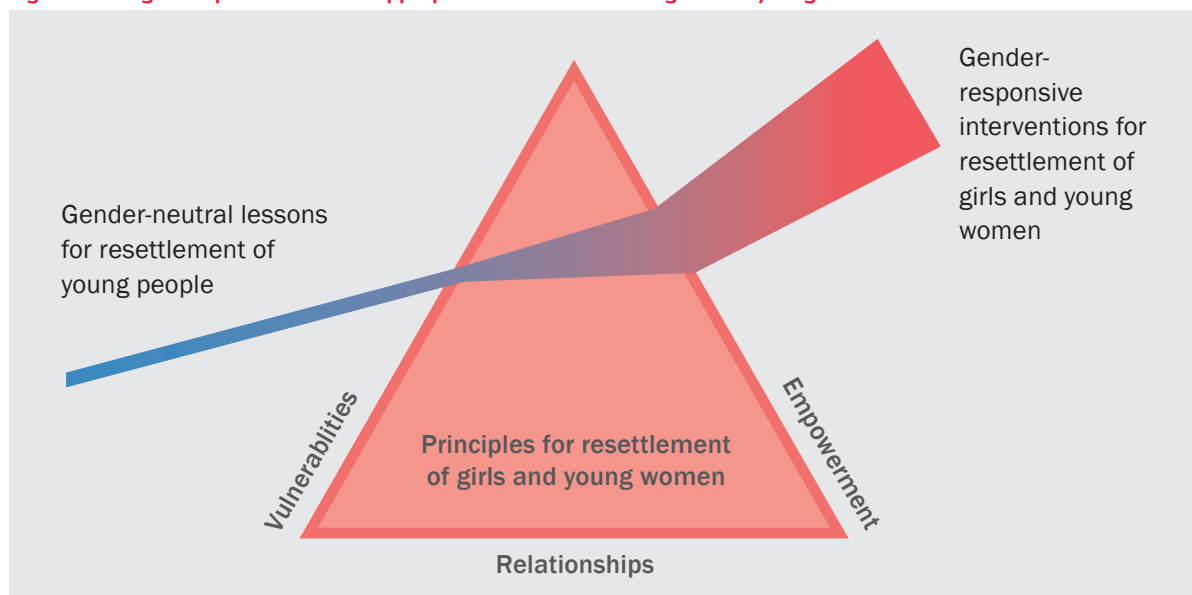
- Although there is no well-developed evidence-base of what works in the resettlement of girls and young women, studies are suggestive of important issues. Again, these are consistent with the lessons for resettlement of young people generally, but with emphasis consistent with the specific needs of girls and young women.
- Interventions were only perceived as effective by this group if they were understood to be relevant to them specifically rather than generic, emphasising the advantage of involving them in sentence planning and of voluntary activities.
- Recent research has shown girls critical of community agencies for failing to maintain adequate contact or making advanced arrangements for resettlement while they were in custody. Early awareness of resettlement plans promoted optimism that desistance was possible.
- The research also drew attention to the girls' perceptions that 'infantilising' behaviour regimes in and out of custody undermined the development of agency and so subsequent change.
- Some research suggests that mentoring relationships may contribute to effective resettlement for this population, particularly in offering personal and emotional support.
- Effective resettlement would appear to involve a shift in personal narrative focusing on increased assertiveness challenging the vulnerabilities from past victimisation. This might involve arrangements and supervision focused on future goals determined by the girls and young women themselves.
- Early development of trusting, consistent relationships with resettlement keyworkers is critical, including sufficient engagement while still in custody. Specialism in female caseloads may be beneficial.
- Recent research shows girls valuing staff who are perceived as listening to them and committed to a participatory approach, drawing on their strengths and interests and tackling self-identified needs. Reliability, consistency and proactively looking for opportunities were characteristics valued in staff.
- Young females who offend are not an homogenous group, and resettlement staff should be sensitive to cultural differences that may open up opportunities for developing personal narratives and identities that can aid desistance.

Synthesis to produce lessons for resettlement of girls and young women

- This review is an important step in redressing the lack of academic attention on the resettlement of girls and young women. In the absence of a clear 'what works' knowledge-base for this group, it has still been possible to develop an iterative synthesis from research in related areas in order to inform the development of gender-responsive services to later evaluate. Four clearly discernible and consistent themes have emerged to provide principles for that development:
- 1** The lessons of 'what works' in resettlement with young people (gender-neutral) are still valid for girls and young women. As such, agencies should still ensure a smooth transition from custody to community, preparing the individual and the outside for release from the beginning of the sentence; coordinate multiple agencies to address multiple needs in wraparound support; and engage to promote positive shifts to non-criminal identities.
 - 2** Resettlement interventions must address the vulnerabilities of girls and young women. Typical backgrounds of trauma and victimisation have significant implications for intervention approach, including the necessity for secure environments and the need for non-confrontational approaches to addressing offending behaviour.

- 3 Past, present and future relationships should be a critical focus in resettlement. Past trauma, exploitation and victimisation in close relationships shape problems and impact on interventions. Developing trust in relationships is vital to engagement at present. Positive and supportive future relationships are key to promoting non-delinquent identities for future desistance.
 - 4 Empowering girls and young women to make positive choices should run through all resettlement practice. Countering the aetiology of vulnerability and subordinating victimisation will involve both structural support and promoting agency. This includes participation in planning and positive empowerment in supervision towards a non-offending identity.
- As such, interventions should be based on the still-valid gender-neutral lessons for the resettlement of all young people, but then be mediated through a 'gender prism' containing three lenses: vulnerabilities, relationships and empowerment:

Figure 1: The gender prism to ensure appropriate resettlement for girls and young women



- The report concludes by presenting examples of gender-responsive practices that would result from passing gender-neutral lessons for resettlement through the gender-prism. Policymakers and practitioners should pass current interventions through this gender prism and develop future provision in such a gender-responsive way in order to meet the specific resettlement needs of girls and young women.

This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, The Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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